

# Constructions, reconstructions and deconstructions of ‘family’ amongst people who live apart together (LATs)

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## Abstract

This article explores how people who live apart from their partners in Britain describe and understand ‘family’. It investigates whether, and how far, non-cohabiting partners, friends, ‘blood’ and legal ties are seen as ‘family’, and how practices of care and support, and feelings of closeness are related to these constructions. It suggests that people in LAT relationships creatively draw and re-draw the boundaries of family belonging in ways that involve emotionally subjective understandings of family life, and that also refer to normative constructions of what ‘family’ ought to be, as well as to practical recognitions of lived family ‘realities’. This often involves handling uncertainties about what constitutes ‘family’.

**Key words:** living apart together (LAT); family; intimacy; friends; personal life

## Introduction

Processes of construction, reconstruction and deconstruction of familial belonging lie at the centre of recent theorisations of intimate life. Questions about choice and givenness, relationality and autonomy, tradition and transformation have animated sociological explorations of how people experience, create, and envision their family relationships. The ways people define ‘family’ have

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become increasingly diverse, stretching the boundaries of a previously narrower constellation (Jamieson et al. 2006) to become something more individually particular and subjectively constructed, something that people 'do' (Morgan 1996), rather than a fixed entity into which they were born. Sociological research demonstrates that individual constructions of 'family' incorporate a diverse range of relationships: they can be based, more traditionally, on 'blood' (i.e. biological, genetic links), on (re)marriage, co-residence, and coupledness (Mason and Tipper 2008; Ribbens McCarthy 2012). Increasingly, family can also include, more unconventionally, bonds between those unconnected by blood or law, such as those between friends (Weston 1991; Allan and Crow 2001; Weeks et al. 2001; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004), and even relationships with animals (Charles and Davies 2008).

Not only do people vary in the boundaries they draw around 'family' and in the inclusions and exclusions they make (Allan and Crow 2001), but such boundaries are also often dynamic, shifting over time (Finch 2007). Boundaries can be strong or weak, and can coincide with the residential unit or extend beyond it (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2003). Personal understandings of whom 'family' includes might also depend on factors such as the quality of the relationship (Becker and Charles 2006), having 'been there' at important times (Edwards et al. 2006), or the frequency of face-to-face contact (Davies 2012). Inclusions and exclusions also might depend on who else is available in an individual's support network. For example, Charles and Davies (2008: 9.2) found that people who had close-knit and extensive blood or marriage networks tended to include fewer friends in their subjective definition of family, while those whose blood or marriage networks were more loose-knit or more geographically dispersed generally included more friends. An overarching theme in sociological research seems to be that, regardless of the particular determinations that people make about whom to include or exclude, 'family' is generally understood as being about a feeling of belonging, being together, and exchanging care and support (Ribbens McCarthy 2012).

While there has been some recognition that families can live across households (Finch 2007), this has largely been addressed in studies of divorce and re-partnering (Neale and Flowerdew 2007), non-

resident or non-biological parenting (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2003; Nordqvist and Smart 2014), and transnational kinship (Smart and Shipman 2004; Williams 2010). There has been relatively little acknowledgement that couples might also occupy separate residences. 'Living apart together' (LAT) relationships, in which couples do not live at the same address, have remained largely outside the attention of family sociologists, whilst the growing literature on LATs has rarely engaged with debates about the changing meanings and practices of family life. Living apart together has been understood as a pioneering form of individualised and flexible intimacy (Levin 2004), existing 'beyond the conventional family' (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004), as a stepping stone towards 'more serious' and 'family-like' relationships (Ermisch and Seidler 2009), or as lacking commitment (Haskey and Lewis 2006). More recent research has explored the diversity of this living arrangement (Roseneil, 2006; Duncan et al. 2013a) and the varying degrees of commitment and togetherness of people in living apart relationships (Stoilova et al. 2014). The relationship between LAT research and theorisations of 'family' has not yet been addressed.

In this context, we examine how those in living apart relationships construct notions of 'family' and the inclusions and exclusions they make when drawing familial boundaries. We explore the extent to which subjective notions of 'family' are associated with blood and legal bonds, such as kinship and marital ties, and we also examine the extent to which non-resident partners and friends are part of the way LATs understand 'family'. To explore the complexity of familial belonging further, we compare the differences in whom our interviewees identified as people who are 'important' to them and people who are 'close' to them, as well as those who offer different kinds of help, and those who are included in their explicit definitions of 'family'. To do so, the paper turns first to those LATs who see their non-cohabiting partner as part of their family, and next to those who include friends as family members. We then look at LATs who do not do either of the above: those for whom family is defined more traditionally by blood or legal ties.

## Methodology

We draw on a multi-method investigation of living apart relationships in Britain, the data for which was gathered in 2011–12 (Duncan et al. 2013b).<sup>6</sup> Firstly, we carried out a quantitative representative national survey of people in living apart relationships in Britain, combining data from three statistically representative general population surveys (NatCen's Omnibus, the British Social Attitudes Survey, and the ONS Omnibus).<sup>7</sup> This strand of the project focused on the social characteristics of LATs, their motivations, attitudes and how they organise their relationships. Secondly, we carried out qualitative semi-structured interviews with 50 people in living apart relationships, in which they were asked about their experiences, beliefs, understandings, and everyday relationship practices in more detail. Finally, we undertook psychosocial biographical narrative interviews with 16 people who were in living apart relationships; however the findings from this strand are not included in this paper which draws on the semi-structured interviews only. Both qualitative samples were drawn purposively from the national survey to reflect the range of socio-economic backgrounds and reasons for living apart in the national random sample. Interviewees' reasons for living apart were identified using the options offered in the survey, which were grouped into three 'types of LATs': 'too early' LATs who said that they lived apart because their relationship was at an early stage or because they were 'not ready' to cohabit (about a third of the sample); 'constraint' LATs who stated that they lived apart due to one or more external constraints, such as job, education, or finances (also about a third of all LATs); and 'preference' LATs, who said that they preferred to live on their own and/or not to cohabit with their current partner (again a third of the sample).<sup>8</sup> Although not statistically representative of the wider population, the qualitative samples do reflect the range and diversity of those currently living apart together in Britain.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> ESRC funded project on Living apart together: A multi-method analysis (2011-13), Grant reference: RES-062-23-2213

<sup>7</sup> England, Scotland, Wales, open data set – Duncan et al. 2013b

<sup>8</sup> For more details on the sample and interviewees' reasons for living apart see Duncan et al. 2013a.

<sup>9</sup> While the semi-structured interview sample roughly corresponds with the spread of characteristics found by the national survey, certain groups are over-represented: women, older LATs, 'preference' LATs, those who live with children, and who are in intermediate occupations.

During the semi-structured interviews, on which this paper is based, we asked the 50 interviewees whom they would define as ‘family’ and to explain what family was about.<sup>10</sup> These fairly open questions allowed the interviewees to express their own understanding of family belonging. As we wanted to explore the complexities of caring, support, closeness, and familial bonds amongst our LAT sample, we further invited our participants to consider the provision of different types of support and to make distinctions between people who are ‘close’ and ‘important’ to them. Participants were asked to tell us who would provide them with emotional, practical (e.g. minor domestic repairs, moving house), and financial support, as well as who would look after them when they were ill in bed.<sup>11</sup> Finally, interviewees were asked to create two lists of people – those who were the closest to them and those who were the most important (permitting overlaps between the two).<sup>12</sup> While the interviewees might have spontaneously spoken about support and important/close people, they might have not necessarily made these particular distinctions unprompted. Being able to examine the interviewees’ explicit constructions of their own ‘family’ and the extent to which these overlapped with the provision of care and support and with feelings of closeness and importance offers opportunities to examine the extent to which notions of family are associated with or detached from the provision of support and feelings of closeness. We also analysed our interviewees’ descriptions of the meaning of family, as well as the overall language in which they spoke about these issues.

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At the same time this sample under-represents men, younger LATs, professionals and people who live apart because they feel it is ‘too early’ to cohabit. While the survey and psychosocial narrative interviews included people in same-sex LAT relationships, the semi-structured research included only opposite-sex relationships.

<sup>10</sup> The exact phrasing of the questions was: ‘Who do you see as your family?’, ‘Why them?’, ‘What is family about?’.

<sup>11</sup> The questions were: ‘Think about the last time you needed help. Who helped you when you needed: a) Practical help? b) Advice or emotional support? c) Financial assistance? d) Who cared for you the last time when you were ill?’

<sup>12</sup> ‘This question is about who *matters* to you in your life now. I am going to ask you to write two lists, one with the people who are most *important* to you and one with the people with whom you are *closest*. You may want to put some people in both columns.’

### **Do LATs see their partners as ‘family’?**

Couples are still normatively expected to be co-resident (Roseneil 2006) and those who do not share a household with a partner have been found to tend to focus less on coupledness and more on friendship (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004), as well as to have closer relationships with blood relatives, such as parents and siblings (Ketokivi 2012). In this context, we explore the extent to which LAT interviewees saw their non-cohabiting partner as a family member and whether non-resident coupledness was related to feelings of closeness and to the exchange of support.

Asked about whom they see as their family, two-thirds of our participants (34/50) included their LAT partner. These interviewees had been in living apart relationships that ranged in duration from four months to 35 years, included all three survey categories of LATs: ‘preference’, ‘constraint’, and ‘too early’. These interviewees varied in terms of gender, education, and age (the youngest being in her late teens and the oldest in his mid 70s). Five were married to their partner and, whilst not everyone who was married thought of their partner as part of their family, most did.<sup>13</sup> Many of this two-thirds of the sample spoke of the solidity, support, love and happiness this LAT relationship offered them, and also referred to their partner as their very good/ best friend, or in some cases as ‘soul mate’. For example: ‘I would say that he’s my soul mate, definitely’ (Jess, early 20s, ‘too early’, LAT for one year); ‘we’re more like sort of soul mates or... very, very good friends’ (Richard, late 60s, ‘preference’, LAT for 18 years).

A rather surprising component of this group was five LATs in relatively new relationships of between four and nine months who saw their LAT partner as family. They said that they lived apart either because of constraining circumstances that they felt unable to change or because their relationship was at an early stage. Three of these interviewees were in their 30s, one was a teenager and one person was in their 50s. All these partnerships involved feelings of closeness and belonging to a couple.

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<sup>13</sup> 3% of the national LAT sample were married (Duncan et al. 2013b), while in the qualitative sample there were 5/50 married LATs.

For example, Carrie (early 30s, 'constraint', LAT for four months) thought that she and her partner had 'connected so well' and Tom (late 30s, 'too early', LAT for four months) felt that his partner was 'the best thing that had ever happened' to him. Similarly, Peter (late 50s, 'constraint', LAT for nine months) was very close to his LAT partner, they were already discussing cohabitation and marriage, and even used spouse terms: 'We're very close [...] she calls me "hubby" sometimes, so I call her "wifey" sometimes'.

This 'new relationship' group points to an overall finding from the semi-structured interviews as a whole: it was the subjective emotional closeness of the relationship and whether it was seen as ongoing - rather than its duration - that determined whether the partner would be seen as a family member. In some cases the feeling of familial belonging extended to include some of the partner's biological family. For example, Charlotte (mid 40s, 'preference', LAT for seven years) thought that the 11 grandchildren she and her partner had between them were 'all equally important' and part of her 'clique', while Rachel (early 40s, 'constraint', LAT for four years) seemed to act as another parent to her partner's children and was in constant contact with them.

Thus people in living apart relationships often constructed notions of family that can be seen as reshaping more conventional familial belonging by extending it beyond shared domesticity, by including shorter-term relationships, and by encompassing their partner's own family connections. However, this reshaping of the notion of family was not always unproblematic and often it took some adjustment for everyone involved. For example, Michelle (early 20s, 'preference', LAT for two years) admitted that only recently had she started feeling that her partner's family was part of her family as well, even though they had a child together and despite being referred to as 'auntie' and 'daughter-in-law' by his biological family: 'now that they seem to have accepted me, I, I'm kind of getting used to the idea that they're my family as well'.

The third of the sample (16 people) who did not include their partner in their subjective definition of family also had the full range of reasons for living apart and varying experiences of coupledness. They

had been with their partners from seven months to 41 years and they had both professional and non-professional occupations. Whilst one might expect that the novelty of some relationships might be an important factor influencing the exclusion of the LAT partner from their subjective construction of family, in fact only half of the people in this group were in relationships of one year or less. Indeed, as we have seen, some people with shorter relationships did consider their partner as family. Rather, their explanations for not including their partner in their family were related either to expectations of greater commitment in the future, or the opposite – there was little commitment at present and low expectations of the future (Carter et al. 2015).

There were also cases where the LAT relationship offered considerable closeness and support, yet partners were not included in an individual's construction of family. This was mainly because 'family' was normatively associated with cohabitation or marriage. For example, James (late 20s, 'too early', LAT for two years) explained that his idea of family was 'anyone with my surname' through kinship and marriage, and so he considered that his partner would become family later on, when 'we're married and we've got our names together'. Similarly, Dean (early 30s, 'constraint', LAT for one year), whose partner had children from a previous relationship, thought that 'they're technically someone else's family', even though he saw them 'in a way as my family'. Living together, or getting married in the future, would make it easier to define them as his family, he thought. Hence, in some cases the ability to 'claim' one's LAT partner as family was constructed through conventional notions of family as based on marriage and cohabitation, and the particular degree of closeness and commitment felt by an individual in their relationship had limited power to override dominant constructions of family.

Mark (mid 30s, 'preference', LAT for one year), who was divorced and a lone parent looking after his young child, was an extreme example of this. He valued highly the companionship that his living apart relationship offered, and he regularly spent time with his partner, who was his first point of contact for practical and emotional care and support. His partner also came second, only after his son, on both the 'important' and 'closest' lists of people, yet, she was not included in his subjective construction of



his family. Rather than resting on any obligation to his partner, Mark's living apart relationship was based on the pleasure of being together in the present, similar to Giddens' (1991) notion of the 'pure relationship', and echoing some of those in Roseneil's (2006) research. Whilst this was seen as an on-going relationship that was 'perfect' for him, and he had no plans or desire to change that in the future, he did not see his partner as family. Similarly, Fiona (early 50s, 'preference', LAT for eight years) had been in a relationship for eight years but was not planning to live with her partner, whom she said was 'surprisingly, not family'. Although she was hoping that this would continue to be an on-going relationship, she felt that being included in family required greater levels of closeness and commitment than they had. Yet, her partner was prominent on both on her most 'important' and 'close' lists (after close blood relatives) and a person she would turn to for practical care and support when ill. These examples highlight the importance of normative notions of familial belonging and how on-going commitment, closeness, and support do not necessarily align with a sense of family membership.

Even though the closeness of the living apart relationship seemed greater for those who saw their partner as family, overall there were very few examples of people who were not close to their partners. In fact, all participants put their partners on the list of 'closest' or 'important' to them people, or on both. This echoes previous research on LATs by Roseneil (2006) who also found that almost all LATs placed their partner in the circle of their closest relationships. In addition, we found that when talking about practical, emotional, and financial support, it was very rare for partners to not be mentioned at some point as providing at least one of these types of care.

Hence, our findings suggest that LAT partners play an important and very often a central part in personal life and are frequently seen as family members. Overall, there appeared to be a high level of care and support exchanged between LAT partners (Duncan et al. 2012), despite the geographical distance between them. Furthermore, LATs often constructed notions of family that can be seen as reshaping more conventional familial belonging, not only by including non-domestic partners, but also

by being inclusive of shorter-term relationships and the non-resident partner's own family connections.

### **Do LATs see friends as 'family'?**

Friendship has recently gained increasing recognition by sociologists as being a vital part of personal life (Roseneil 2000, 2004; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Allan 2008) with researchers pointing to the 'hidden solidarities' (Spencer and Pahl 2006) of friends in individual support networks. Friends are sometimes regarded as extending the nature, as well the reach, of family (Weston 1991; Weeks et al. 2001). In particular, individuals living outside conventional co-residential coupledness are sometimes described as having more fluid support networks, both practically and emotionally (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Jamieson et al. 2006; Ketokivi 2012). Research suggests that this group may rely more on friends, as opposed to biological kin and sexual partners, in receiving care and support in everyday life (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). People who are younger also tend to spend more time with friends and are usually more reliant on friendship networks (Jerrome 1984; Hartup and Stevens 1997; Park and Roberts 2002; Oswald and Clark 2003; Pahl and Pevalin 2005). Hence, it might be expected that LATs, who are on average younger than the general British population,<sup>14</sup> might have stronger connections to friends. So, we investigated whether LATs see their friends as part of their family.

#### **Elusive**

Around a third (14/50) of the LATs we interviewed explicitly included one or more named friends in their family, and can, therefore, be described as having 'friend-inclusive' family networks. The other two-thirds had 'friend-exclusive' definitions of their families, based mainly on biological and legal ties. The 14 'friend-inclusive' interviewees were a diverse group in terms of age, gender, class, and length of relationship, as well as reasons for living apart. But one commonality between them was that,

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<sup>14</sup> The majority of LATs are young: 43% of our national survey sample was aged 16–24, 33% were aged 25–44, and 11% were 55 or over (Duncan et al. 2013b).

besides friends, almost all 'friend inclusive' interviewees also included their partner in their definition of family (12/14). The extent to which friends were involved in the personal networks of the interviewees who included some friends in their construction of family also varied. For some, friends dominated family networks and preceded or outnumbered other connections on the lists of 'close' and 'important' people. Sometimes friends offered more support in terms of care, practical or financial help, or emotional support than kin (blood or marital ties). For others, however, there was a more balanced contribution of kin and friends, and for some kin played greater role but friends were still considered family.

Graham (early 50s, 'too early', LAT for one year), for example, had a diverse list of 'important' people which was dominated by friends but also included extended family ('close' and 'distant' blood and ex-in-law relatives). Married and divorced twice, his definition of his family included his own two children from a previous marriage, as well as the children of his current partner and those of his last wife (who had a different biological father but to whom Graham felt like a parent). Several groups of friends were highly important to him and would be the first people he would turn to for both practical and financial help. His friends had been there for him when his marriages broke down, and he felt they were 'great sounding boards'. They seemed to be the more stable and enduring relationships over his life trajectory and, he said, were definitely part of his 'family unit'.

Harriet (early 30s, 'too early', LAT for five years), on the other hand, had never been married, did not have children, and over the five years of the relationship had a period of cohabitation with her partner. She was currently living apart from her partner because they both needed their own space to accommodate their art activities – but, nevertheless, they were hoping to start living together again in the future. Whilst Harriet was very close to her parents, siblings, and extended family, she was also immersed in a wide circle of artists, who were her 'urban family', as she described them:

I believe in that kind of 'urban family' term where I just think actually your friends become like your day to day kind of support network. [...] there's a lot that my friends know about me that none of my family know just because they're there like to witness it. (Harriet)

Harriet also referred to one of her best friends as a 'sister', emphasising the importance of this relationship.

The strongest example, however, of friend-dominated family was Helen (early 40s, 'preference', LAT for four years) who did not have any of her biological family on her lists of 'important' or 'close' people, and did not consider that she would ever ask her biological family for any kind of support. 'My own family I don't particularly consider them family, to be honest', she said, and her sister was 'more of a friend, acquaintance-friend sort of thing', as they did not stay in touch and did not even exchange Christmas cards. Helen had substituted her biological family with a close friend, her LAT partner, and the mother of her ex-partner, to whom she referred as 'mother-in-law', without ever having been legally related.

Most of the interviewees who included friends in their definition of family suggested that they would seek friends for various kinds of help, predominantly practical or emotional, but also financial, and caring in times of illness. It is difficult, however, to judge the extent to which friends were replacing kin and also to extrapolate whether this was a matter of choice, practicality, or the lack of kin members able or willing to offer the needed emotional, practical, or financial engagement. While the remaining two-thirds of our sample did not include any friends in their subjective definition of family, friends were still important sources of care and support for almost all interviewees. Indeed, only three people from the 50 did not include any friends in their lists of 'close' or 'important' relationships or amongst the people whom they would approach for different kinds of help.

This mixed picture is supported by our 2011 national survey which found that 27% of respondent LATs would go to a friend, colleague, neighbour, or a housemate if they had a problem they could not solve,

compared to only slightly higher proportion of people – 34% - who would turn to a family member for this kind of help, and 34% who would turn to their partner. In terms of care, in times of illness friends were again important – with 22% of LATs looking for help from friends when they were ill, scoring higher than partners (20%), although in this case family was more significant, with 53% of LATs saying that they would turn to a family member when ill. In the light of the qualitative findings, we might question whether ‘family member’ did not include some very close, family-like friends.

The semi-structured interviews demonstrated in more depth the emotional importance of friendship, and showed that friends were seen as important sources of help - even for those interviewees who did not include friends in their definition of family. Some of the interviewees who saw family as being about blood or marriage ties still highlighted the high emotional value of their friends, usually ‘in addition’ to family support:

I have a lot of close friends and they’re important to me. [...] [E]ven though you do have your family, you do need some friends as well because you can talk to friends differently to family. (Wendy, mid 50s, ‘preference’, LAT for eight years)

I’ve just known them so long, and we’re very close and they are important. I’ve had a lot of experiences with them, good and bad, and love to see them. (Evelyn, mid 50s, ‘constraint’, LAT for three years, previously cohabiting for 32 years)

Like Wendy and Evelyn, many interviewees pointed out the special connection of long-term friendship and having been through a lot with their friends. Similar to LAT partnership, friendship bonds were maintained across geographical distance and in some cases despite irregular face-to-face contact. Being able to socialise with friends was also often mentioned by interviewees as important, and in some cases friends were seen as offering additional and quite different kinds of support - something unique. Thus, not including friends in their definition of family did not necessarily mean that they were less valuable relationships: quite often interviewees spoke in very similar terms about friendship and

family – with both seen as providing support, various types of help, understanding, and generally being there for each other. Furthermore, for some interviewees distinctions between friends and family were difficult to draw and these categories were blurry and unclear, as we discuss in the following section.

### **Who else is ‘family’ for LATs?**

The majority of our interviewees (34/50) included their LAT partner within their conceptualisation of their family and some of these also included friends. The remaining third (16/50) included neither friends nor their partners in their family network. So who is family for these remaining 16 LATs and are there any commonalities in constructions of family across the two groups?

Based on the exclusion from their notion of family of both their LAT partners and friends, these 16 LAT interviewees might be expected to have a rather conventional and also more coherent notion of family. However, we found this group to have a wide range of subjective understandings of familial belonging – from rather narrowly defined ones that included only nuclear family members to much broader and more complex ones that involved former or ‘pretended’ in-laws, and companion animals. The principles of inclusion and exclusion operating for this group also varied – from people who generously included everyone to whom they were related by kinship or legal ties, to those who were very selective and included only those whom they saw as deserving to be included because they were close, supportive, or stayed in touch. For example, Sharon (early 60s, married for over 40 years, ‘preference’ LAT for the last four) not only excluded her husband from her family but also her daughter, with whom she was not close, leaving only her sister and her ‘semi-close’ son in her definition of family. In contrast, Steven (late teens, ‘too early’, LAT for less than a year) had a much less exclusive definition of family, describing family as ‘the people you either have a blood or legal connection to’ and listing a large number of people including his parents, sibling, aunts, and uncles as his family. Wendy (mid 50s, ‘preference’, LAT for eight years) was also inclusive in her conceptualisation of family, and thought of

her ex-husband as her family, whilst Craig (late 30s, 'constraint', LAT for under one year) saw his ex-brother-in-law as family because they were 'still pretty close, pretty chatty'.

There is further evidence of the complexity of personal relationships when we look at whom this group of interviewees included and excluded from their lists of 'important' and 'close' people. Feelings of closeness and importance did not necessarily correspond to inclusion in subjective definitions of family but reflected more the 'actual' state of relationships and the practical exchange of care and support, while 'family' more often had a normative, symbolic status. Arguably, the most realistic representation of the day-to-day dynamics of personal life was the reporting of giving and receiving different kinds of support (practical help, emotional advice, financial help, and caring when ill) – this is where normative expectations were least important and people reflected on actual practices. Here there was *some* overlap between people defined as 'family' and those who offered different kinds of support in practice, but these did not necessarily match.

Regardless of whom exactly interviewees included in their family – whether their partner was included or not, whether specific friends were part of their family or not, and whether family was more narrowly defined as mainly blood and legal ties - there were some commonalities in the way our interviewees spoke about family: boundaries were very often unclear, inclusions and exclusions seemed dynamic, and notions of 'family' were more implicitly present than easily definable. For example, the question 'Who would you include in your family?' was quite often experienced as a difficult one and our interviewees generally seemed to muddle their way through improvised answers, sometimes reframing the question in their own terminology and making distinctions between 'immediate family' and 'close family', or even 'my family' and just 'family'. For example, Dean (early 30s, 'constraint', LAT for one year) based his definition of his family on the people who had lived with him when growing up: 'my immediate family is my immediate family. I've always just thought of us four, as our family'. Describing family in the 'nuclear' sense, including his (now divorced) parents and a sibling, he found his exclusion of his step-mother, sister-in-law and nephew 'a bit odd' and struggled to understand why

he was doing this. Similarly, Tom (late 30s, 'too early', LAT for less than one year), who thought of his father's new wife as part of the family, but not his mum's husband, nor his sister's husband or her child, found it all 'a bit weird' : 'I don't know why. I can't really explain. Never really thought about it before'. His definition, like those of many others, departed from what might be traditionally seen as the (extended) 'family' and also pointed to the fact that, while significant sociological attention has been focused on family dynamics, people might not necessarily live their lives with a clear notion of who exactly counts as family.

The language of 'family' that was available to people often did not seem to be able to express adequately the complex and highly particular emotionality of intimate relations, or individuals' feelings of belonging and not-belonging to a group of significant others. It was not sufficient for capturing the ambiguity that was felt about what constitutes 'family' or to reflect the lack of clear-cut distinctions between 'family' and 'friends'. Our interviewees often expressed the difficulties they experienced in responding to the question asking them to define what they meant by 'family' and in justifying how their own inclusions and exclusions were determined. They seemed perplexed, and often articulated their uncertainties, sometimes even expressing their confusion at their own constructions, changing their minds about things as they spoke. For example, Andrew (early 50s, 'preference', LAT for three years) seemed very doubtful about whether to include his aunt, and Lisa (late 20s, 'constraint', LAT for one year) struggled for words to describe the nuances of her family attachments:

[Family is] my kids, first of all, and my mum, and my aunt, although I do see my aunt but I mean [...] technically she is part of my family but, which might be a slight difference to... Who do I see as my family? [...] Um ... well, my mum and my kids I guess. (Andrew)

My family is [son] and [boyfriend]. That's my family like now, my- yeah, see, it would be me, [son] and [boyfriend]. Then I've got my family which is my mum, my dad and my two sisters then you've got everybody else. But, no, my family, *personally my family now* is [son] and [boyfriend], yeah definitely. (Lisa)



This struggle to define family is linked to an inability to decide where to draw the boundaries on the one hand, and on the other to the inadequacies of categorical language to capture the complex relations and intimate emotional experience of personal life. This was signalled by interviewees' attempts to innovate with language, as expressed by Lisa: '*personally my family now*', '*my family*' more generally, and then my family of '*everybody* else'.

In addition, when our LAT interviewees spoke of family they also sometimes assigned marital/in-law bonds to people to whom they were not legally connected; it was their feelings about the relationships that created the attachment and 'kinship'. For example, Richard (late 60s, 'preference', LAT for 18 years), who had never met his son's girlfriend, referred to her as 'daughter-in-law' and put her on his list of 'important' people 'because of my son'. Some family members were assigned greater importance by referring to them with language for (presumably closer) blood ties. For example, Stacey (mid 20s, 'constraint', LAT for five years) described her partner's mother as 'a second mum' and Serena (early 20s, 'preference', LAT for two years) used the same expression to describe her aunt who was actually higher up on the list of 'important' people than her biological mother.

In addition to these rather fluid, self-constructed family boundaries, there was also language transference, with people using the language of 'family' to describe their friends and the language of 'friendship' to talk about blood relations – a process that Pahl and Spencer (2004) refer to as suffusion between friends and family. For example, Harriet, Carrie, Stacey, and Katie all referred to their long-term friends as being 'like sisters', and Neil and Phillip used 'like a brother' or 'like a father' to describe the close relationship with male friends. Similarly, some interviewees referred to their blood relations as friend-like: for instance, Phillip spoke of his sister as being 'like a friend' and Carrie talked about her mum, aunt, and cousins as being 'like best friends' to her. Kin relationships were also often described as emotionally supportive, non-hierarchical, and open – characteristics perhaps usually ascribed to 'chosen' friendship relations (Pahl and Spencer 2004; Charles and Davies 2008), and suggestive of wider tendencies to the democratisation of intimate life (Giddens 1991). Thus, certain

ideal-type characteristics were transferred from family to friends, and vice-versa, to signal the higher value of these relationships and their enhanced quality and importance, as was found by Pahl and Spencer (2004).

Other interviewees worked hard to maintain the distinctions between friends and family, which was sometimes difficult in practice. Calling herself 'old-fashioned', Michelle (early 20s, 'preference', LAT for two years) said she was 'a bit concerned about the fact that people tend to make up family' and explained that her family was based around blood relatives and 'whoever else comes along with the package'. Michelle was determined to make sure her son understood who his 'real family' was, as she still remembered her own upset as a child when her 'aunt' and 'cousin' turned out to be mum's friend and her daughter. Yet, paradoxically, she described some friends as 'my family that I've chosen', which both reinforced and undermined her insistence on the 'real family', as she simultaneously both upheld and deconstructed the boundaries between friends and family.

There were also acknowledgements that relationships were dynamic and changed over time, so rather than being 'given', blood, legal, and friendship bonds were seen as somewhat open-ended. Yet, at the same time the symbolic status of blood relations was also significant, with some interviewees stating that 'blood is thicker than water', and also claiming the 'obviousness' of why some close blood relatives were important to them. Another aspect of continuity is the high importance very often assigned to children, as has been suggested by Beck and Beck Gernsheim (1995) and Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000), amongst others. Children were talked about as being 'the future', 'an extension/part of you' and 'your life' and were associated with a feeling of an on-going parental responsibility. This feeling was predominantly linked to one's own biological children, but also sometimes to the LAT partner's children, and at times to the offspring of a previous partner. Children very often occupied the top places in interviewees' lists of those 'closest' and most 'important' to them – sometimes despite little contact or difficult relationships. Hence, for some interviewees, particular aspects of family

relationships seemed to stand as normative and pre-given constructs, unchallenged by everyday relationship dynamics, and independent of actual closeness and exchange of care.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the findings of our research suggest the value of the move towards a broader and more inclusive focus on personal life in sociology in which meanings of family, coupledness, and friendship as intimate relationships are interrogated and explored in their complexity and particularity for specific individuals. Living apart as a relationship form poses challenges to conventional understandings of 'family' as based on biological ties, legal bonds, and shared domestic space. Our findings about the meaning of family for those in living apart relationships echo many themes from the literature on contemporary family and intimate life – the continued significance of a subjective sense of familial belonging, the importance of friendship, the language transference and blurred boundaries between friendship and kinship, and the centrality of care and support as practices that construct and give meaning to intimate relationships. Many of our interviewees considered their non-cohabiting partner to be part of their family, which seemed unrelated to the length of the relationship and their stated reasons for living apart. Their constructions of family were made on the basis of feelings of belonging and support, but also represented subjective decisions about the ways in which the living apart relationship compared to normative ideas of 'family' and 'commitment'. Yet, LAT partners generally formed an important, and often central, element of personal life for our interviewees, regardless of whether they were seen as family members or not. LAT partners often ranked very high on the lists of most 'important' and 'closest' relationships and were seen as a significant source of emotional and financial support and practical help. This provides insight into the relative unimportance to LATs of shared domesticity in the construction of family life and intimate relationships, even for the supposedly closest of relationships – coupledness.

Similarly to previous research suggesting that family belonging is often created by marriage and blood ties (Jamieson et al. 2006; Gilding 2010; Edwards et al. 2012), a third of our interviewees saw their

family as constructed around legal and kin bonds. These LATs referred to the default bonds of 'whoever comes with the package' to draw the boundary around their family and seemed to prioritise the importance of these over other connections, such as friends. Such bonds were often seen as 'obvious' and self-explanatory, pointing to their unspoken cultural privileging in society more widely. Yet, even for this group, constructions of 'family' were far from uniform or unproblematic. They included a wide variation in subjective understandings of family, ranging from 'tight' and highly selective nuclear configurations to broad and inclusive 'real' and 'pretended' biological and legal ties, and companion animals. Further complexities in the understanding of personal networks arose in this group's inclusions and exclusions of 'important' and 'closest' people, which did not necessarily overlap with their definitions of 'family'. This parallels other studies that emphasise the diversity of individual understandings of family (Pahl and Spencer 2004; Charles and Davies 2008; Mason and Tipper 2008; Mason 2010; Ribbens McCarthy 2012), as well as research on the gaps between family ideals and actual lived practices (Williams 2004; Mason 2010; Edwards and Gillies 2012; Heaphy and Davies 2012). Our research further suggests that – for our LAT interviewees at least - subjective notions of 'family', and understandings of who is 'important' and 'close' in personal life, are invariably in dialogue with normative constructions of what 'family' ought to be.

At the same time, in response to the questions about to whom they would turn for different kinds of help, our interviewees tended to speak about actual lived experiences of giving and receiving support, which made discussion of exchange of care and support less loaded with normative connotations. Hence, it is not surprising that the practical exchange of care and support did not necessarily correspond to feelings of closeness and importance or subjective constructions of family, demonstrating the possible disjunctions between actual practices and normative assumptions about intimate life.

A further argument for the importance of broader and more inclusive theorisations of family belonging and intimate life arises from our findings about the role and place of friendship in personal networks.

A third of our LAT participants explicitly counted friends as part of their subjective delineation of family. Combined with the overall prominent place of friendship in the lives of most of our interviewees, these friend-inclusive families varied in intensity of support and closeness - ranging from those for whom friends came first in their personal networks to those who had closer bonds to people with biological and legal ties but who still counted friends as members of their family. Moreover, we also found that friends were generally an important source of care and support for almost all LATs, regardless of how they constructed their 'family'. Friends featured on the lists of 'close' or 'important' people or amongst those who would offer different kinds of support for all but three interviewees, which demonstrates the prominent place of friendship in personal lives of LATs. Friends were also sometimes seen as offering something unique – a bond that cannot be replicated by other close relationships.

Deconstructing further the boundaries of 'family' was the language transference between kin and non-kin – with non-kin relationships being 'kinned' and kinships being described with family-like language as a way of demonstrating the high value of particular relationships (Mauthner 2005; Simpson 2006; Pahl and Spencer 2004; Mason and Tipper 2008; Ketokivi 2012). Furthermore, for the large majority of our interviewees the language used to talk about blood and legal ties, friendship, and couple relationship was very similar, regardless of who was considered to belong to their 'family'. Those attachments were similarly based on close, affectionate, and supportive relationships (Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Simpson 2006; Ribbens McCarthy 2012). Hence, the importance of friends for LATs and the way friendship blurs with kinship to form constructions of 'family' or important bonds of intimacy and care might also be seen as offering an argument for the significance of a more expansive notion of personal life (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Smart 2007; May 2011).

A final point relates to the ambiguity, blurriness, and instability of 'family'. Overall, the conceptualisations of 'family' of our interviewees combined taken-for-granted constructions of family connections and creative re-constructions of traditional familial boundaries – refracted through feelings of emotional closeness and related to the material realities of the exchange of care and

support. Very often, our interviewees struggled to decide on, understand, and explain what they meant by family, lacking the words to label various shades of family attachments in their shifting, de-traditionalised configurations. Thus, the constructions of 'family' of people who live apart from their partner demonstrate the complexity and subjective ambivalence of familial belonging, the need of individuals to belong, and the struggle to determine the boundaries of such belonging when the meaning of family is not taken for granted. Alongside this apparent fluidity of 'family', the experiences of people in LAT relationships highlight the continued tenacity of normative perceptions of what 'family' ought to be – a place of powerful emotional importance and a key reference point for feelings of belonging. A personalised notion of 'family', deconstructed and reconstructed, with multiple meanings and embodying complex relationships, remains constitutive of the intimate experience of people living outside the 'conventional' cohabiting couple.

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